

Revisiting celebrations

with young children

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Elizabeth Dau and Kerryn Jones

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Community celebrations	3
Vietnamese New Year	
3. School or centre celebrations	5
The garden party – a celebration of life	
4. A celebration of children’s learning	7
Celebrating success in the classroom—Top Ten!	
5. Traditional celebrations	10
Christmas	
Easter	
Mothers’ and Fathers’ Days	
Australia Day	
Birthdays	
Ming’s birthday party	
6. Celebrations significant to children and families	15
Child-centred celebrations	
7. Conclusion	18
8. References	18



Introducing the authors

Elizabeth Dau is an early childhood consultant. In this role she presents professional development for both staff and families in child care settings, preschools and the early years of schooling. She is also an Honorary Fellow with the University of Melbourne's Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood.

She is the editor of *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood*, now in its second edition, and has written many articles on this approach. She is the editor of *Child's Play: Revisiting play in early childhood settings* and *Enhancing Children's Development*, and is currently compiling a publication on play in the outdoor environment. Anti-bias and children's play are the major interests in Elizabeth's professional life.

Elizabeth has extensive experience in the early childhood field, beginning with teaching in the ACT, and has held a number of leadership positions including Program Manager of the Northern Territory Children's Services Resource and Advisory Program and Educational Manager of the children's services program in the TAFE sector.

Kerryn Jones is currently employed by the Department of Education and Children's Services in South Australia, as Director at Pennington Kindergarten. She previously worked as Director at St James Community Kindergarten, as an Early Years Curriculum Officer, and at the Sydney Lady Gowrie Child Centre as a teacher and Training and Resource Officer.

Kerryn co-authored the book *Persona Dolls: Anti-Bias in Action* and coordinated the development of the *Fair Play* training and resource kit. She wrote, with Ruth Mules, 'Critical Thinking and Activism in Children's Services', a chapter in *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood*.

Kerryn has a commitment to rethinking early childhood practice to ensure social justice and inclusion for young children.

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Our thanks to the families and staff who shared their celebrations. A special thankyou to Jasper for his exciting phone call about riding his bike without training wheels and the story of his 'head' and 'heart'—how many of us feel like that from time to time?

Special thanks also to the children, staff and families of Pennington Kindergarten in Adelaide for permission to use the stories and most photos included in this book. Thanks also to the children, families and staff of St James Community Kindergarten.



Introduction

Barbara Creaser and I first wrote *Who's in Charge of Celebrations? A child centred approach* in 1994. This publication has been reprinted many times and the Australian Early Childhood Association (now Early Childhood Australia) approached me to ask if I was interested in rewriting the book. I eagerly agreed as almost 10 years have passed since that first book and some of my thinking has changed in this time.

I felt it was important to have a practitioner to help with the writing, and Kerryn Jones immediately came to mind. Some of you will know her for her strong sense of social justice and her work on anti-bias. Working with Kerryn has always been a pleasure and a learning experience for me.

One of the things that has changed since *Who's in Charge of Celebrations?* was written is the way we view children and the teaching and learning process. *Who's in Charge of Celebrations?* was based very strongly in the Piagetian view that children learn in stages related to their ages and based in developmentally appropriate practice. That view has been strongly challenged, and indeed as early as 1995 Dockett says:

'We need to question our understandings and expectations of young children; we cannot determine, explain or excuse behaviour because a child is not at a certain "stage of behaviour"' (p. 66).

Lambert (1995) argues that young children can succeed in areas previously thought to be too difficult for them (they were not at the age and stage). However, tasks need to be meaningful, the problem to be solved considered relevant by the child, and the language used both meaningful and instructional to the child.

Having said that, there are some things that for me have not changed, and one of those is the importance of celebrations in early childhood services that are meaningful to the children and families in the service. To that end, you will find that some sections of this book include a repeat of some of the material in *Who's in Charge of Celebrations?* written in collaboration with Barbara Creaser, as I believe that children should always have their voices heard. If the celebrations of the dominant culture become a priority, then many children may be marginalised. If the voices of the minority groups are not heard, then the diversity of what it means to be Australian is missing from our early childhood programs.

Discussed in this book are celebrations under the headings:

Community celebrations

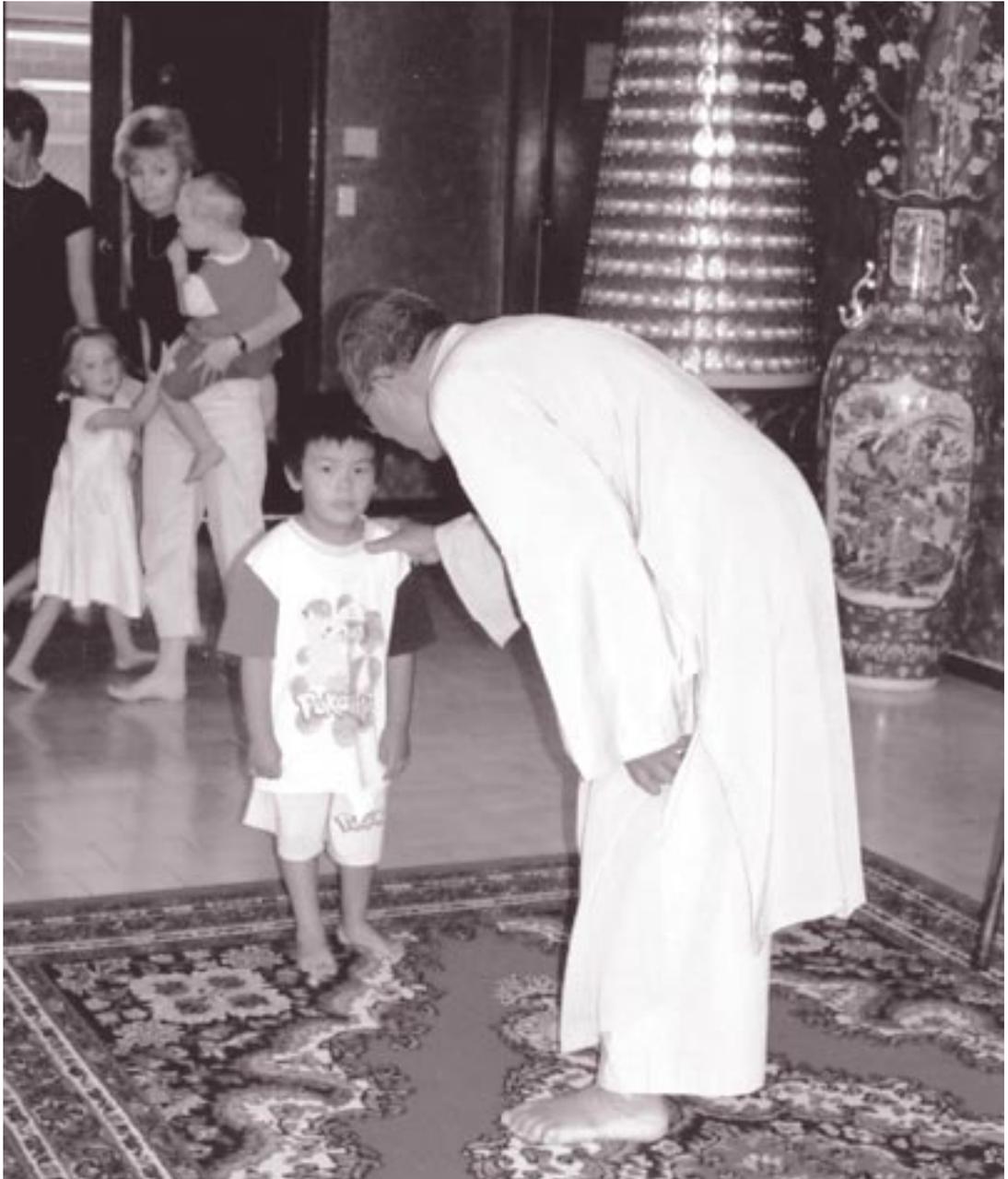
School or centre celebrations

A celebration of children's learning

Traditional celebrations

Celebrations significant to children and families

Elizabeth Dau





Community celebrations

Vietnamese New Year

Pennington Kindergarten in South Australia is rich in diversity, with approximately one-third of the children and families in our centre speaking a home language other than English. This diversity gives us the opportunity to engage meaningfully with many community celebrations. For each child at our kindergarten, there are special community events that celebrate who they and their families are within the broader Australian community. These may range from the local Christmas Parade to the Vietnamese Full Moon Festival. For the staff at the kindergarten, it is important that each child and their family see the significant community events in their home life reflected within their educational life. It is also important that young children are given the opportunity to appreciate the diversity of lifestyles and experiences within Australia, and the richness this affords us as a nation.

One such community celebration that the kindergarten recognises through participation is the Vietnamese New Year. Pennington Kindergarten is located within walking distance of the local Buddhist Temple, where each year a celebration of the New Year takes place. Staff, children and families visit the temple to participate in the celebrations, which include the spectacular lion dance – a loud, colourful and exciting display. Children have also had the opportunity to speak with the monks and delight in the beauty of the temple and its gardens.

Back at the kindergarten, the children make their own dragon and parade through the garden to the accompaniment of drums, cymbals and gongs. A watermelon is cut and shared amongst the children. The redder the flesh, the luckier our coming kindergarten year together will be, and so significant ‘homework’ is undertaken by staff to source and select a ‘really red’ watermelon. The significance and excitement of the celebration carries on for weeks after the New Year event, with children continuing to ‘do the lion dance’ again and again.

Enabling the Vietnamese-speaking children to be the knowledgeable contributors to discussions and the curriculum is a priority of the celebration. What stands out to me is the significance this holds for these children. They speak with the monks in their home language and they see a significant part of their lives and culture recognised within another part of their life – their kindergarten life. They become the knowledgeable part of the kindergarten community.

This year we celebrated the Full Moon Festival together with the children from the school next door. Preparations began weeks in advance, with the school children coming to the kindergarten to work on designing and making lanterns together. Van (a Vietnamese-speaking teacher) explained the significance of the festival to the children, which

prompted many discussions and theorising about how the moon becomes full and where it goes in the daytime. Traditionally, the moon calendar is followed for Vietnamese celebrations, and the Full Moon Festival holds religious or spiritual significance. A range of different-shaped lanterns was made for the event and this became a 'treat' for the children. The celebration is seen by them and their families as a children's festival.

Each child created their own lantern to carry in the parade and collectively they worked on a large moon to overcome the problem that the event would take place in the daytime. The children also made and sent invitations to classes at the nearby school, inviting them to join in the celebration.

On the actual day of the celebration, the children baked Moon Cakes to share with the school children after the parade. Everyone involved met at the predetermined place, ready for the festival. Children brought along their lanterns and we sang a number of Vietnamese and English songs together to mark the start of the event. And then the parade began. Some children carried the Full Moon, others followed carrying their lanterns, and some formed the band that played the beat for our parade.

This is not only a significant celebration for some of the children at the kindergarten; it has also become a significant event for all the children, as it has become an integral part of our kindergarten's own culture. It is not only a celebration that takes place in the community; our kindergarten now plays a valued part within that community celebration.



School or centre celebrations

The garden party – a celebration of life

Kindergartens were originally envisaged by Froebel as ‘children’s gardens’. Over the years, our garden had become a rather dusty and uninviting space. In early 2002, a long-term vision for creating a new ‘children’s garden’ was developed and the governing council and families began fundraising to breathe new life into the outdoor learning area.

During this period of planning and the beginning of the work on the new ‘Kindy-Garden’, two sad events rocked our community when two of the young children from the kindergarten died in separate accidents. Our developing vision for the ‘children’s garden’ began to hold a new and special significance as a space that was not only a celebration of ‘being four years old’, but also as a celebration of the lives of two little boys who loved playing there.

On the first day of June 2003, with most of the work completed, a garden party was held for children, families, staff and the community to celebrate the realisation of a very special children’s garden. The children sang their favourite songs, the local member of parliament undertook the official opening, and events such as making friendship bands and face painting were provided. In his speech, the local member commented on the community spirit of all involved in creating not only a beautiful garden but also a memorable celebration of life.



All the children at Pennington Kindergarten put their handprints onto a long ribbon that was tied around part of the newly developed garden and this was cut at the official opening. Children and families were seen looking for their child’s handprint.





A celebration of children's learning

Early childhood services and schools are places where children and staff engage constantly in the process of teaching and learning. How often do we take the opportunity to celebrate children's learning? Over a term our staff and children worked together on a project titled *'Look what I made': Expressing ideas, feelings and possibilities through discovery and image making*.

The curriculum for the term was devoted to an exploration of children's creativity in which children were able to observe and work alongside artists in developing techniques and skills.

Within a few weeks, the quality of what the children had created became obvious, and we realised we needed to organise a forum within which to share their work and to celebrate their learning. An Art Show was planned at the School Hall and children began to create a piece of work that they would exhibit.

Children began referring to themselves as 'artists' as they worked and as they shared their work with others. The excitement of the nearing Art Show became a regular topic of their conversation. They made invitations for their families and friends and began selecting and naming the work they would exhibit.

Staff framed the children's work and, on the evening prior to the Art Show, set up the display. An official opening ceremony was set for 11.00 am and, as children and families entered the hall, a collective gasp could be heard – the sheer beauty and breadth of the work stunned both the children and their families.

As children led their families through the exhibition and I heard their conversations, I realised that this was not only a celebration of each child's creativity but also a celebration of the curriculum itself. It was also a celebration of inclusion as every child was able to participate successfully – language, ability, age and gender placed no limits on children's creativity. As one staff member explained, 'They all found that spark inside themselves because they could all do it.'

Celebrating success in the classroom—Top Ten!

Annette has a class of students in their first year of school. One of the school priority areas is developing skills for successful learners, and to achieve this, all teachers are using *Program Achieve* with its five keys to success. Annette chose to begin with the *Getting Along* key. She wanted to be explicit about what getting along would look like in a classroom with 26 students, and to acknowledge and celebrate their successes.

Talking with the students, she listed all the ways the class would know when they were getting along successfully. Skills they identified included:

A learning story: Hudson's skeleton

(Written by Sue, a staff member at Pennington Kindergarten)

Hudson came to kindy today with a paper skeleton that he had made at home.

His Mum said that he was really interested in the workings of the human body.

I found several books about the human body that we had in the library. Hudson pored over these books asking questions about the various parts and what they do.

Up until now, Hudson had continually dismissed all suggestions that he contribute a piece of artwork for the Art Show. I suggested that he might like to draw or paint a body or skeleton. Hudson was adamant that he couldn't.

To try and make it more interesting, I brought out black paper and white markers from the cupboard. Hudson looked mildly interested. I opened one of the books. He chose a big foldout body and looked at the skeleton, but still insisted that it was too hard and he would not be able to draw it. I encouraged him to have a go and suggested that a good starting point would be the head. Hudson drew the head, followed by the spine, and then there was no stopping him. He carefully checked with the book as he was drawing, going back several times to add details. He realised that he had not put joints in the arms or legs and went back to add them. He had also missed small bones in the neck and added these too. When he had finished, he had produced a fantastic picture of which he was very proud.



Hudson standing proudly under his drawing of the skeleton that he chose to exhibit in the Art Show.



- we take turns;
- we solve problems by talking;
- we work well together; and
- we share things with others.

Annette and the students then identified examples of successful behaviours and recorded them on the Top Ten Chart. Examples have included:

- helping each other get changed for swimming;
- sharing maths resources, making sure everyone had what they needed;
- being helpful and taking turns when working in cooking groups;
- looking out for the new reception students on their transition to school visit;
- sharing the new play blocks; and
- talking rather than fighting when someone acts unfairly.

The Top Ten Chart is displayed and students proudly share their successes with parents. When the class has ten acknowledgements of successful behaviour, they are able to choose a way of celebrating their achievements. A list of possible rewards was brainstormed and the students voted for their choice. They have included viewing a video—with popcorn to eat, an extra session with the play boxes, free play on the computers in the computer room, an extra 20 minutes on the play equipment after recess, and cooking something special for afternoon tea.

The focus for the Top Ten can be changed regularly as the learning focus changes. The next key to success is *Organisation!*



Traditional celebrations

In Australia there are a number of traditional celebrations marked in different ways. The list can be quite long. Space does not allow for consideration of all that may be regarded as traditional. Specifically, the celebration of Christmas, Easter, Mothers' and Fathers' Day, Australia Day and birthdays will be included. It is important that each child and family see the significant community events in their home life reflected in educational life. There may be so many celebrations that they may dominate the curriculum, so how, when and what you celebrate need consideration.

Christmas

Some early childhood programs make the decision, in collaboration with families, not to include Santa Claus in celebrations, but this does not necessarily mean that they do not celebrate Christmas. Many services do, but choose not to include Santa Claus because of the commercial focus this brings. We need only to read newspapers and watch television prior to Christmas (often up to two months before) to know that this is a time of heightened commercial activity. 'Christmas and Santa have become associated with commercialism, acquisitiveness and competitiveness and is beyond the means of many families' (Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood 2002 p.2). We need to ask ourselves: 'Does this commercialism have a place in early childhood services?'

Helena, a kindergarten (preschool) director:

'We have made a decision that we are going to avoid the bombardment of Christmas—the decorations, the snow and all the other ingredients that we see everywhere. We are also aware that most of our families celebrate Christmas so we need to acknowledge that. We do this by telling the children a simple story of the first Christmas. If they want to make cards or decorations they are not discouraged. It is their choice' (Dau, 2002 p.20).

The decision as to whether or not to celebrate Christmas is one that should be taken together by families, children and staff. Before you take the step of asking families, you need to clarify your own thinking – as with all celebrations you would ask why would you choose to celebrate Christmas with young children. What do children learn from the celebration? The question of 'why' celebrate Christmas (or indeed all festivals) should always come before any decisions of the 'how' and take into account the views of families, children and staff.

You also need to be prepared for the responses, which might mean that:

- Christmas is avoided altogether, although this ignores the opportunity to explore with children an event that may be very significant in their lives and community;



- The religious aspects of Christmas are celebrated; and
- The giving of gifts is emphasised rather than the receiving.

The decision not to include Santa Claus in celebrations does not necessarily mean that early childhood programs do not observe Christmas. Early childhood programs and schools celebrate Christmas in different ways, perhaps including traditional stories of St Nicholas bringing gifts to children in need.

And consider what the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC) has to say:

‘A high-quality centre adapts to the changing needs and wishes of its specific staff, parents and children. Requiring it to celebrate any particular festival or event prevents it from doing so’ (2002 p.4).

Easter

The celebration of Easter perhaps raises as many issues as does the celebration of Christmas. We can tell a simple story of the first Christmas—a mother, father and baby named Jesus—but the story of Easter is a story of crucifixion and rising from the dead. We need to ask if the Easter story is as appropriate for young children. When working with young children it may be more appropriate to celebrate Easter as a time of re-birth and hope, and there are many ways to do this.

Let’s return to Helena’s kindergarten:

‘We don’t tell the story of Easter but we do have an Easter egg hunt “simply for the fun of it”. We feel there is a place in kindergarten to do things that from time to time are planned for no other reason than to have fun or for the wonder of it’ (Dau, 2002 p.20).

Mothers’ and Fathers’ Days

The tradition of celebrating Mothers’ Day and Fathers’ Day is not as old as some other celebrations on the calendar. For example, Mothers’ Day dates back only to the last century. The United States President, President Woodrow Wilson, declared in 1914 that the second Sunday in May each year would be known as Mothers’ Day. Recognition of the day spread rapidly overseas to countries including Australia. The success of the day led to an explosion of cards and advertising of goods that ‘all mothers need’ and the original intent of the day as one of a public expression of love for mothers has been somewhat lost in the commercialism.





When considering whether or not to celebrate Mothers' and Fathers' Days, we need to take account of the diversity of family structures in the early childhood program and in the community. Some children will live in what is still referred to as a nuclear family, but others will live with a mother or father only, within a lesbian or gay family, with grandparents, and so on. How you celebrate, if indeed you do, must be considered with staff, families and children.

Australia Day

This can be a day of celebration focusing on the diversity of the Australian nation, incorporating discussion and activities centred on what is special about being Australian: our values, our interests, our foods and our heritage, from both an Indigenous and early white settlement perspective. For those programs that are in recess in January, a day could be set aside during February for such a celebration.

Birthdays

As with Christmas, Easter, and Mothers' and Fathers' Day, the celebration of birthdays raises vexing questions to which there is no easy answer. Again the question of observance of children's birthdays or name days needs to be discussed with staff, families and children. Families celebrate birthdays and name days in very diverse ways, if indeed they are celebrated at all.

Some families, for religious reasons, do not celebrate birthdays and may want their children excluded from any such celebrations in early childhood programs.

Some parents in the paid workforce—for whom time is an issue—may want their children to have a party, cake and candles at the early childhood centre.

Some families like to select, with the help of their child, a few guests and issue invitations to attend a party at the child's home.

Some programs may celebrate with food different from that usually associated with birthdays because they have a 'no sugar policy'.

Some early childhood programs may celebrate birthdays without food but, for example, encourage children to bring in photos, or use photos held at the centre, to acknowledge the child's growth and achievements since their last birthday.

Have you asked the children in your centre what a birthday celebration means to them? The following story from St James Community Kindergarten in Adelaide is of a birthday planned entirely by the children.

Ming's birthday party

Ming was a persona doll at our kindergarten. He had become a very important member of the kindergarten community and had visited many of the children's homes. Part of Ming's persona was that he was four years old and, after him being a part of many of the children's birthday celebrations, Charlotte asked, 'When is Ming's birthday?' The children decided that Ming would turn five tomorrow and began preparations for a birthday celebration.

A list was written of what Ming's birthday celebration should include, such as games, presents, cards and, of course, a cake. The children then busied themselves with the organisation of the event. The 'creating area' became a hive of activity with many children working together on wrapping a 'pass the parcel', making small gifts, party hats, decorations, and writing cards. The next day the celebration began. Children had brought gifts and cards from home and one child had brought an inflatable cake for the party. The children sang 'Happy Birthday', presented Ming with the cards and gifts, and then played 'pass the parcel'. It was a joyous and thoughtful celebration, planned and implemented entirely by the children, and based upon their own interpretations of what a birthday celebration should be.



Jasper without the training wheels!





Celebrations significant to children and families

Karen, a staff member in a child care centre, talks about celebrations in the service where she is employed:

‘The focus of our celebrations is children. It’s not difficult to think of things that are important to them and have meanings for them and their families. Children, or a family member, will let you know what is worth a celebration—and celebrations don’t equal parties for us—there are other ways of celebrating and sometimes this just means acknowledging an achievement as cause for celebration and perhaps some clapping or cheering.’

One does not have to think too hard to realise some of the significant things in children’s and families’ lives. They might include:

Success with a skill: Jasper’s mother and father decided that it was time for the training wheels to come off his two-wheeler bike, as they appeared more of a hindrance than help. So the training wheels came off and Jasper successfully rode his bike without them.

When asked about how he felt, Jasper replied, ‘My head kept saying ‘stay calm, stay calm, it will be all right, just stay calm’ but my heart kept saying ‘panic, panic!’ Riding his bike without assistance was certainly cause for celebration. Some of the neighbours came out and watched and cheered, and he rang his grandmother in great excitement to tell her.

Jasper is six. How could you celebrate this achievement when he came to school the next day?

The wonder of nature: A group of four-year-olds was spellbound by the beauty of the bubbles they were blowing. The adults encouraged their wonder by pointing out how the smaller bubbles held their round shape, how bigger ones were changed by the breeze, and how there were rainbows of colour in the surface of the bubbles. At first the children watched and watched. Later they became very excited and chased the bubbles and tried to burst them. The magic of the bubbles made the children feel elated and was cause for celebration.

Having grandparents come to stay: Jessica was two-and-a-half when her grandfather visited. At first Jessica watched her grandfather from across the room. It was a long time since they had first met, and Jessica noticed his grey hair and beard. Jessica’s parents and grandfather talked and had a cup of tea.

After a while, Jessica went to her room and brought back one of her favourite books, *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*. She quietly climbed onto her grandfather’s knee. He acknowledged Jessica with a cuddle and then read the book. Jessica now felt very good about having a ‘grandpa’ come to stay.

Jessica's grandfather took her to family day care the next day and his visit was celebrated in the family day care home. He was introduced to the other children and told how exciting it must be for Jessica to have him visit.

Child-centred celebrations

Decisions about celebrations need to be based on an understanding of the events of childhood that excite children in a way that thrills and inspires them and helps them feel good about themselves.

Celebrations need not involve the whole group; the events of individuals' lives can become cause for celebration with just the child and perhaps his or her friends as we:

- sing a song;
- write down children's words;
- take a photo;
- give a cuddle; or
- put a message on a celebrations notice board.

Ana (below) celebrates her very first painting of a castle with a photograph to commemorate the special event.





Many of you will probably remember achieving new skills, and learning to swing or to whistle could be one of them. Recall the pleasure of the first time you learned to swing your legs backwards and forwards and the swing moved—a cause for a celebration?

Dimitrios has learned to swing. A staff member gathers together two of Dimitrios's closest friends and takes them to watch him. 'Just look, he's got the idea of how to tuck his legs in and then push back. He can go higher and higher. Dimitrios, we are really amazed. You can really swing now. That's great. Does it feel good? Can you see us down here?'

Later the staff member puts a sign on the celebrations notice board.

Today Dimitrios learned how to swing

That afternoon Dimitrios came to the same staff member with a drawing he had done and said: 'This is a picture of me on the swing. Can it go on the board near the sign that tells everyone I can swing?'

This is just one example of how the idea of celebrations can be introduced to children and shared with families. Think about establishing a notice board to share celebrations with children and their families in your early childhood program.

Another way to celebrate is an example from Pennington Kindergarten. There is a large red heart shape on the wall that celebrates random acts of kindness. Whenever a child does something thoughtful and caring for another child, the act is written onto a small heart and pasted onto the larger one. The child gets three cheers from the rest of the children in recognition of their kindness.



Conclusion

Take time to step back and look at what is celebrated in your early childhood program. Ask yourself:

- What events have meaning in children's and families' lives?
- What aspects of celebrating are important?
- What celebrations contribute to forming each child's identity within the Australian community?
- How do these celebrations locate children within the Australian community?
- Will each child feel included or will they feel marginalised?
- What opportunities do children have to hear the voices of people similar to and different from themselves?
- What opportunities are there for children to see themselves as part of a tolerant and diverse world?

If the curriculum is to be meaningful to children, it needs to honour the joyous and wonderful experiences of being a child. Curriculum should be constructed and enacted with children and families playing an important role. This does not apply only to celebrations in the early childhood service, but in other parts of the curriculum as well.

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Revisiting celebrations with young children

Revisiting celebrations with young children is a timely addition to the debate surrounding what should be celebrated in early childhood programs. This book is written by very experienced early childhood educators Elizabeth Dau and Kerryon Jones, both of whom have a strong interest in anti-bias approaches and social inclusion. A challenge is given to early childhood professionals to involve children and families in decisions about local celebrations. *Revisiting celebrations with young children* emphasises the importance of each child and family seeing the significant community events in their home life reflected in educational life. As well as examining traditional celebrations, the discussion includes examples of the ways in which significant achievements in children's lives and learning can also be celebrated.

'Celebrating with others is one of the great joys in life for young and old alike. Learning why we celebrate key events in our lives, families and nation, and appropriate ways to express enthusiasm are important parts of every child's education—both in the home and at school. *Revisiting celebrations with young children* helps early childhood teachers think through the issues of celebration in an increasingly complex world. As a mum, I'm glad to think that our educators are helping children appreciate the joys of life—from national celebrations such as Australia Day to the personal triumphs of birthdays and learning new skills—alongside other essential learning.'

Lisa Curry Kenny, Chairman, National Australia Day Council

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